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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach to teaching writing through design. Students were asked to design the following items: a dance, an outfit, a toy, a game, and a recipe. As these designs were completed, they were then presented to an audience and time was provided for the students to write about their experience of the process of producing. A number of calligraphic projects are described, including cutting out the letters of a favorite word and arranging them on a construction paper background, shaping a name with colored yarns on cardboard, and formulating the letters of a name and designing a graph over it in order to create shapes. It was concluded that most students enjoyed this approach, and that the students became involved in the process of creating. (TS)

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DESIGN IN ART AND LITERATURE: DRAWING STUDENTS INTO WRITING

For centuries astronomers following Ptolemy believed the sun revolved around the earth. For centuries, too, scientists studied the "problem" exceptions to their formulated laws of how the sun revolved around the earth. Copernicus studied the same law and suggested that the "problem" exceptions were, in reality, the answer: the earth revolved around the sun. The answer was bound up with the problem, was the problem from another point of view.

I teach writing and literature at the senior high school level and in the last few years have learned that writing, which for me is often an answer, is for most still a "problem." By the time my students arrived at being juniors and seniors, writing was still very much their "problem." A little investigation has shown me that through the grades:

1. writing is avoided and thus by implication is less important than literature or at the most a handmaid to it.
2. writing has been and is still used as a punishment
3. topics suggested for writing are boring or are simply copies of suggestions made by guru teachers like Kenneth Koch or John Holt without the vitality and struggle these same great teachers brought to them
4. writing skills such as comparison, contrast, description, summary and analysis are accumulated but remain inert
5. writing "creatively" is kept for special and in most cases that means "better" students or is assigned as a kind of verbal lollypop after the "real work."
6. writing is theoretically important to most teachers but they do not write themselves and really do not have time for it in the classroom.

My personal experience tells me that writing is a way of

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understanding, of getting at what I think, of pursuing a thousand insecurities and expectations and hopes that tend to avoid wording, of discovering who I am and what I feel. I set about finding a way to convey my attitude, to make my experience readable to my students, to invite them into the world of writing. What I really saw myself doing was not pouring in knowledge but facilitating students' understanding of themselves. Generalizations hobble, but I experience that almost all 17 and 18 year olds are really interested only in themselves. I wanted to tempt my students to reflect on their own experience and to stand by them as their confidence in themselves as rich individuals increased. To those of my colleagues who have questioned the "usefulness" of this direction, I have responded that education is ultimately not about knowledge but about wisdom and wisdom is pursued down strange paths and into wild meadows. Many of my students did not even know there was a road and I wanted to show them that at least it was a possibility.

I. AN IDEA

Humanities programs which I have studied and in which I have participated combine music, art, and literature. They approach these disciplines from an historical or genre point of view. One of the major aims of such programs is to provide students with a sense of the interrelatedness of these human endeavors. The theoretical side of these subjects is presented and practical conclusions about their relationships and about man and his relationships are drawn out. The approach I have tried differs in several respects. I approach these same subjects from the point of view of design. An object is designed to accomplish a function. A dress may be styled to hide or to reveal; its material is chosen to provide warmth or to allow "breathing"; it may be designed for evening relaxation or day time work and these functions impose limitations. Long and flowing and silky material in sleeves is fine for relaxing but the same sleeve design for the day's work becomes merely annoying. Design whether in dress or dinnerware or buildings is functional first.

Writing lends itself to this approach. By inviting a student to grapple with a design problem, I hoped he would have the

experience of choosing materials for his specific purpose, have the satisfaction which making something provides, discover that theory can emerge from within a work, and assemble a variety of feelings and facts which would provide material for writing. I wanted to assure students that words, like clothing and toys and buildings, have shapes and colors and textures and that these can be arranged in patterns to accomplish a specific purpose. I wanted to allow a student to recognize and to make better use of his own inner resources and to delight in his own accomplishments. Because I am also involved in art, I often see poems or short stories or novels in terms of shapes and colors and textures and I hoped to entice my students to active involvement in learning. The course which emerged from these hopes I have called a "Creativity Workshop" and the work is both fun and demanding.

II. "DESIGNMENTS": THEIR INTENT AND REACTION

I asked my students to design the following items: a dance, an outfit, a toy, a game, a receipe. Design is purposeful. In a painting one is free to do anything but if one is designing a bread knife it must have a handle and a cutting edge; the design is controlled by these requirements and they are clear and concentrated and accomplish a purpose - like a poem or a short story.

The students did design and perform their dances for the group. They also had strong feelings about the process. The task seemed impossible and "what on earth did that have to do with language arts?" They were furious at me and embarrassed to make themselves vulnerable to the group. Since I had told them I would not ask them to do anything in the course which I was not prepared to do myself, I danced for them first and alone. They performed in groups and well. I had asked them to illustrate the music they had chosen and that the danced illustration should be pleasing to the viewers. I also encouraged them to watch and to learn from each other since I was not the only one from whom they could learn. The group to perform last had learned. They came dressed alike and had the five members of their group arranged in intricate patterns of size and actions. Their sense of design was part of them but they

were totally unaware of their own personal resources. They quickly came to point out what made the best dance and I provided the design vocabulary to accompany it: dominance, subdominance, balance, rhythm, proportion. We further explored these principles in simple drawn designs both symmetrical and asymmetrical. We also talked about the frustrations involved in creating these simple items as well as the pleasures of producing.

At the same time I assigned the dance I asked the students to get a special book for this class - a hardbound book with plain pages - a book that was to be their own and which might not be completed in this class but which would be their own first book. I brought my own volumes of drawings and writings and explained that because I could not easily tear out any page, I continued to accumulate loads of material for writing in the form of sketches, articles, phrases I liked, personal reflections and reactions, mistakes as well as good starts and all of these would work for me as time went on. As time does go on, these books take on tattered and individualistic appearances and become far more closely guarded than an ordinary textbook. I have promised that I will never look at these books without their knowledge and even if they want my opinion on one thing, it is still possible to keep sections of the book private.

As the toys and games and outfits are completed they are given audience and I have provided time for writing on their experience of the process of producing..Some toys and games were more successful than others and I have discovered that finding out what constitutes a good toy design says much about what makes a good poem design or an effective design for a personal essay. Continued work with these "designments" provides principles which can be applied. There is delight in designing. We have an ability to solve problems and designing is bringing order out of chaos as well as creating.

The process of writing continues during production and students accumulate personal reflections on their own reactions. They begin to have a sense of the pattern to their own reactions. Once personal patterns are recognized, one can begin a new process of understanding; it is possible to retain patterns with which one is

pleased and valuable to have the distance to change those that need it. It is difficult to set out the steps to what I have attempted as these processes constantly overlap and backtrack and move forward again depending upon each student and the day's situations. However, at some point I have begun to move from making with material to making with words or "word-play" as I usually refer to it. For words are played with. For the young child words are the most splendid toy as well as the greatest mystery. Even before understanding he puts them together and takes them apart; he pops them into his mouth and spits them back out with gusto in odd, often unrecognizable shapes. Word making is a profound form of play for the older student as well and word play can be a tool for grasping the world which most students are attempting to do.

I have begun the "word play" by having my students cover a large sheet of paper with the letters of their names. I suggest that they extend the lines of some letters and add color if they wish so that they have a design. Not only are they playing with their own names but they are coming to a sense of how letters and words have shapes.

There are other calligraphic projects possible if more than one seems desirable. Numerous variations could spring from these.

a) take the same word in different languages and draw the letters over each other until shapes and patterns are

formed.

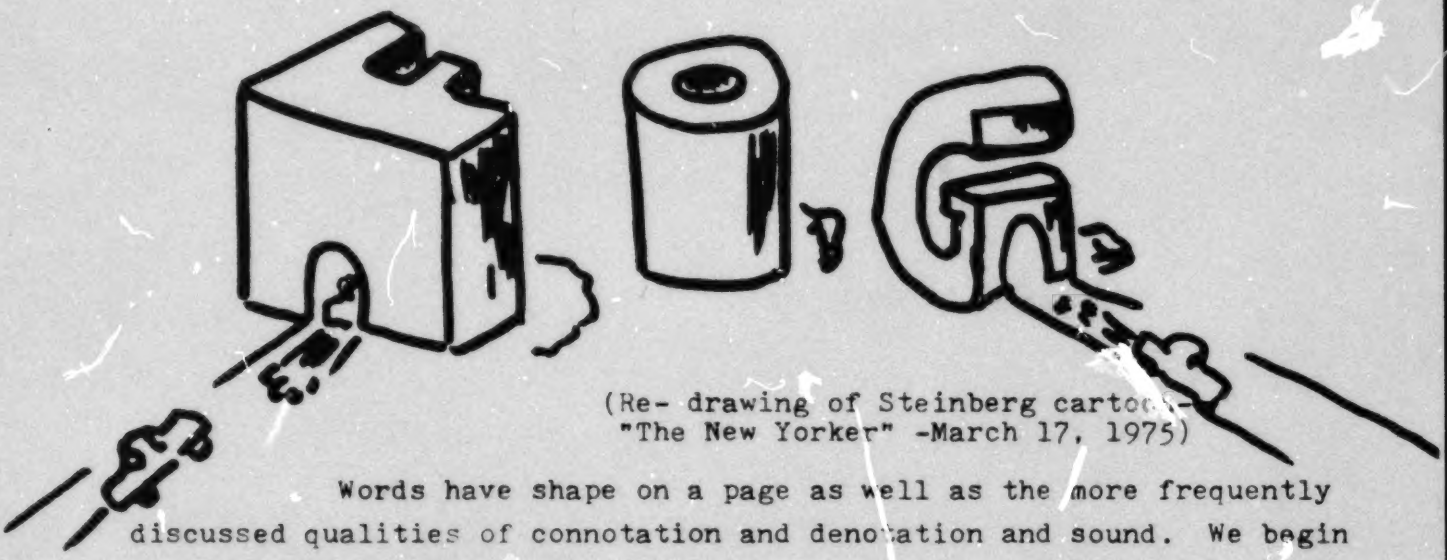
b) cut out the letters of your favorite word and arrange on a construction paper background.

c) using the letters of the word for the name of an animal, flower or other object design them into the shape of the animal, flower or object itself elongating or shortening the letters when necessary.

d) shape your name with colored yarns on cardboard.

e) formulate the letters of your name and design a graph over it in order to create shapes.

In a cartoon in the March 17, 1975, issue of "The New Yorker" Saul Steinberg plays with the word FOG. The work of Steinberg and of a number of poets in the Concrete poetry movement moves the question of letters and numbers to another level of language.



(Re- drawing of Steinberg cartoon- "The New Yorker" -March 17, 1975)

Words have shape on a page as well as the more frequently discussed qualities of connotation and denotation and sound. We begin to talk of how words linked and overlapped by an author begin to take the shape of a poem or short story. In all of this process the students continue writing and it is "in process" writing and need not be a finished anything. The reading involved in the course is mostly poetry and short stories as I find these the best to deal with given the limitations in time and attention spans. Stories have shapes and rewriting the ending of a story or writing the story from a different point of view is a graphic way to illustrate this. In a similar way

a single word has the power to change the whole mood of a poem. A simple drawing overlaid with a colored acetate paper or a colored tissue paper can also serve as graphic illustration of tone or mood in a poem and usually provokes a discussion on how the poet achieved this in words. In all of these projects the students are in touch with what it is to make and how each part has an effect on the whole.

III. RESPONSE

Designing and drawing, like writing, calls on memory. Stephen Spendor in "The Making of a Poem" which appeared in Brewster Gheselin's THE CREATIVE PROCESS notes that "a memory once clearly stated ceases to be a memory; it becomes perpetually present because every time we experience something which recalls it, the clear and lucid original experience imposes its formal beauty on the new experiences. It is thus no longer a memory but an experience lived through again and again." It becomes a peg on which a whole rack of similar experiences throughout years can be hung. The observing, drawing, designing and writing begins, I think, to collect for students a series of experiences which provide them with additional material for writing from their own rich experience. The process seems to me to be one of uncovering and discovering which are preludes to recovering.

Recovering implies having some distance on an object or experience. It implies having liberal space and quantities of time and the ability to reflect on one's experiences. Reflecting on one's experiences is a way of exploring into the new. One sees how it has arrived from the past and that process is an integrating one. Reorganizing and designing past experience is to stake a claim on our own landscape. Learning - real learning has nothing to do with accumulating chips of meaning into a woodpile life. Such fragments unused become simply an eyesore on one's personal territory. It seems to me that rather than stockpiling tidbits of information, education can be the constructing of something ever new and daily changing in which each chip is not only useful but beautiful and worthy of contemplation. The approach I have attempted seems to me to give the possibility of recovering the past, of integrating it and of playing with it in the

most profound sense of play. The approach is not based on a push-button philosophy and it will not produce a guaranteed outcome. It is not consumer-geared and passive and totally rational. The process does have something to do with bringing objects into relationship with oneself, with changing and growing and watching that happen; it swirls turns back, draws into and spills out again. Like the life process there are certain signs which I take as indications of a living involvement of students.

Most students enjoy the course. The test of a game is that it is fun to play; the test of a good pie is that it tastes good; the test of a dance is that it is beautiful to watch. Sucess inthese examples is judged in delight. To play, to dally, to caper are the true modes of creation. History shouts the lesson over and over and we do not hear. We forget that in Eric Hoffer's words:

> man's most unflagging and spectacular efforts were made not in search of necessities but of superfluities... The utilitarian device, even when it is an essential ingredient of our daily life, is most likely to have its ancestry in the nonutilitarian. The sepulchre, temple, and palace preceded the utilitarian house; ornament preceded clothing; work, particularly teamwork derives from play. We are told that the bow was a musical instrument before it became a weapon and some authorities believe that the subtle craft of fishing originated in a period when game was abundant-that it was the product not so much of grim necessity as of curiosity, speculation and playfulness. We know that poetry preceded prose, and it may be that singing came before talking...On the whole it seems to be true that the creative periods in history were buoyant and even frivolous...One suspects that much of the praise of seriousness comes from people who have a vital need for a facade of weight and dignity...La Rochefoucauld said of solemnity that it is 'a mystery of the body invented to conceal the defects of the mind.'[1]

This process is not new. In the seventeenth century Robert Herrick saw a "wild civility" in a careless shoestring. These delights in disorder "do more bewitch me than when art/Is too precise in every part." I have set out to bewitch my students into learning and writing.

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[1]George B. Leonard, EDUCATION AND ECSTASY, New York, Delacorte Press,1968, p.99.

to facilitate their own recovery of themselves, to be around when they learn any number of things, to experiment and write and dance with them- to let them see that learning happens in many ways and in many places and at unpredictable times. Their response is positive. They are responsible for producing and they are responsible for working; they are involved in the process and that is the most important part for me.

IV. SOURCES AND RESOURCES

There is no one item which has been a source for me. Many books as well as thoughts and dreams of people have provided me with material and the amount of material and the types vary for me with each group. Below are listed books which have been seminal for me. Each of them opened my eyes in one way or another. The listing is a random one; ordering by importance or significance would be impossible.

WORDS AND CALLIGRAPHY FOR CHILDREN - John W. Cataldo
SURFACES IN CREATIVE DRAWING - Ernst Rottger
RUBBINGS AND TEXTURES- John J. Bodor
AN EXPERIMENT IN EDUCATION - Sybil Marshall
THE ARTIST'S HANDBOOK OF MATERIAL AND TECHNIQUES - Ralph Mayer
TEACHING ART _ SOURCES AND RESOURCES - Adelaide Sproul
ROCGARDEN AND IABYRINTH: A STUDY IN ART EDUCATION - Seonoid Robertson
TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY OF BEING - Abraham Maslow
FANTASY AND FEELING IN EDUCATION - Richard M. Jones
THE CROSSING POINT - M. C. Richards
EDUCATION AND ECSTASY - George B. Leonard
THE CREATIVE PROCESS - Brewster Ghiselin (ed.)
CHILDREN IN FEAR - Stephen Joseph
WRITING WITHOUT TEACHERS - Peter Elbow
WRITING TO BE READ - Ken Macrorie
TOOLS FOR CONVIVIALITY - Ivan Illich
THE ZEN OF SEEING- Frederick Franck
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SHAPE, THE SHAPES WE NEED, THE SHAPE OF TONS - Kurt Rowland
ART AS EXPERIENCE - John Dewey
THE AIMS OF EDUCATION - Alfred North Whitehead
ESSAYS FOR THE LEFT HAND - Jerome Brunner

CIVILISATION - Kenneth Clark

BEHOLD MAN - Lennart Nilsson

INSIGHT, THE ASCENT OF MAN - J. Bronowski

EXPERIENCES IN BEING - Bernice Marshall (ed.)

AWARENESS: EXPLORING, EXPERIMENTING, EXPERIENCING - John O. Stevens

Copernicus' realization that the "answer" was just the "problem" stated from a different point of view seems momentous for me. Possibly, the "answer" to the writing problem which older students have also lies in the problem itself.

(sample student response sheet)

AN ORIGINAL

By _____

Design a skirt suitable for evening wear

Indicate the following with a reason for your choice:

1. Material:

2. Color:

3. Feeling you wish to create:

(Sample student response sheet)

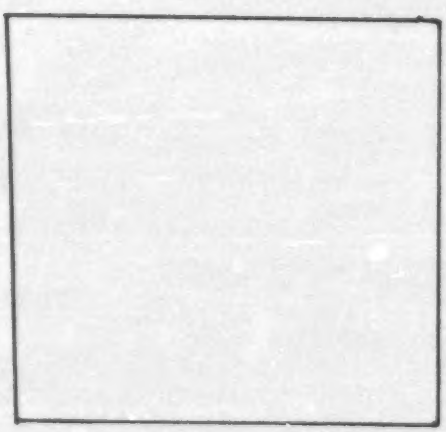
AN ORIGINAL TOY DESIGN

BY _____

AFTER you have considered the toy and before you begin making it, answer the following:

1. Age of child - has that an influence on your design? If so what?

2. Material & color - consider whether the toy is to be used inside or outside, the kind of durability the age group demands, the safety aspects the designer must consider. Note below those factors which influenced you

3. 

Sketch very simply the toy you are designing. Note here any special items you took into consideration.